

## It Changed My Life

*Millie Rahn, Heritage Partnerships*

I got into public folklore through the 1960s folk revival, although that's hardly a fashionable or politically correct answer to the career epiphany question. The folk revival offered glimpses into another America, and this first taste of traditions not my own, yet part of my larger cultural heritage, prompted me to search deeper and become a cultural voyeur. By my early teens, I knew that somehow and somewhere I wanted to work with communities and their traditions, but public folklore as a field was yet to emerge. Consequently, I took a "do-it-yourself" approach to cultural archaeology. I started with radio, recordings, and festivals, and I worked backwards in time and outwards into other genres. All the way, music was the road map. Eventually this exploration led me to become a card-carrying folklorist. I wound up in faraway Newfoundland, where it can be argued that there never was a folk revival because traditional culture still prevails. But the early influences were the ones that shaped me as a public folklorist.

To be sure, my grandmothers—one Pennsylvania "Dutch" and the other Irish—both were major influences. Traditional culture was an integral part of their lives, but as a child, I didn't know that the lore they inadvertently were passing on to me had a name or that studying folklore could even be an occupational pursuit. Instead, my career epiphanies came about at the early Smithsonian folklife festivals, in coffeehouses, and on the airwaves. Straight out of college in the mid seventies, I worked with George Carey on the first Maryland folklife survey and festival. Such work was called "applied folklore," and it was before the time that most states, and even the United States, had publicly-funded agencies and programs. In my spare time, I hung out with music-makers in the roadhouses and dance halls around Baltimore and Washington.

Tradition bearers and revivalists came together in those gatherings, and the main distinction was that one group sat at the other's feet to learn from the masters. When I was doing my own fieldwork in the early 1990s with revivalists, mainly those who passed through Club 47 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I started to notice a pattern. In the course of interviews, sooner or later someone would say something to the effect of, "I discovered a performer, genre, instrument, or community, and it changed my life." Click! Those very experiences changed my life too, but I had never named the source. The early public events and public expressions of culture convinced me that this is my life's work. I was as changed as my cohorts and informants.

My sixties activism along with my acquired Massachusetts worldview taught me that to be successful we must work within the system. I found that projects can be entertaining and still be legitimate presentations of folklife. It's the visibility of our work at festivals, in exhibits, on tourism trails, and in public media that keeps the funds available and educates the funders—the taxpaying public—about the value of culture and tradition in our lives. The celebratory events show how we all make our place at the table.

Perhaps not everyone is as interested in texture and context as we are, but it's the "public" in public folklore that determines our occupational future. We must keep our work in the public realm and make it available for all our audiences. We might have to compromise our political correctness or stretch our disciplinary paradigms to make this happen, but negotiation is a cornerstone of our training. Compromise is an honorable tradition in itself. In this process, public folklorists can take conversations from the academy and restore them to communities.

---

## **Evoking My Past**

*Lucy Long, Bowling Green State University*

Selecting one pivotal episode for describing my involvement in the multidimensional field of folklore is difficult. After considering the multitude of events that have had an impact on me, I realized that they spoke to the three aspects of folklore that attracted me to the discipline in the first place and that convinced me to continue working in the field. Those three aspects were the content, the theories and methodologies, and the people in the field. The early moments of epiphany occurred at that bastion of tradition and politics, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

My first impression of folklore was that it consisted of old Appalachian stuff—stories, music, and dulcimers. That was fine with me, since my father is from western North Carolina and I grew up with clogging, fiddle tunes, and dulcimer music. I was aware from an early age that these forms of entertainment were not considered desirable within "mainstream" culture, and I was frequently teased for my accent and my musical tastes. To discover that other people actually thought my culture worthy of study and celebration was extremely affirming. This revelation was what first attracted me to folk festivals. At later festivals, I heard audiences responding with the same jolt of recognition that they, too, have folklore in their lives. The Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife vividly demonstrated to me that folklore went beyond the stereotypes.

The first festival that I attended was around 1977. I think that it was raining that day and there was almost no audience. Still, I was enchanted with the event. I don't remember the variety of tradition being presented except for Seminole basket making, weaving, and CB radio users. The CB